THE BATTLE OF NORMANDY

(June 6 to July 18, 1944)

IN the small hours of June 6, 1944, First Lieutenant Ohmsen, in command of a fortified post on the east coast of the Cotentin Peninsula, was the first to signal the approach of the invasion fleet. The alarm sounded throughout the German fortifications and garrisons in Western Europe. Around 1.30 a.m. the invasion battle, for which the world had been waiting so long, was on.

LANDINGS

The amphibian operations were carried out along familiar lines. Employing an immense fleet of more than 4,000 ships together with several thousand smaller craft protected by the combined Anglo-American navies in English waters (the ratio of their composition being about 3:1) and backed by some 11,000 first-line aircraft, the Allies let loose their customary preparatory and protective bombardment. Apart from the matter of quantity, there was only one feature which distinguished this landing from its predecessors in the Mediterranean: the truly lavish utilization of paratroops and air-borne formations. These were ordered to get at the defenders from the rear, to disrupt their lines of communication and, if possible, to capture important traffic centers.

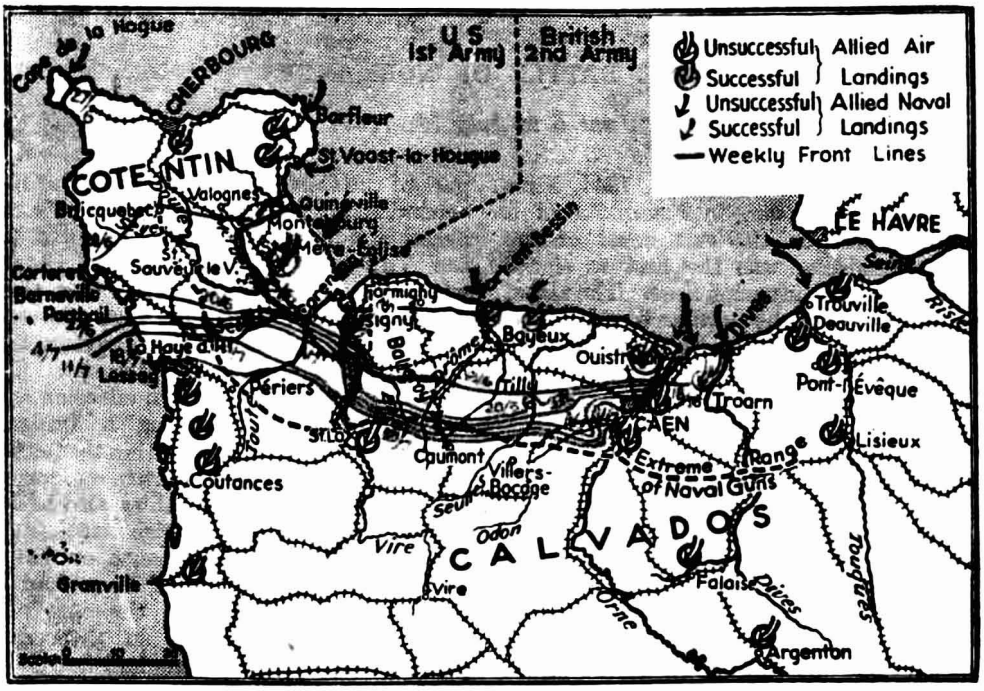
Our map indicates the main areas where landings were carried out from the air and the sea during the initial phase of the invasion, those that failed as well as those that succeeded. Among the failures were the air landings on the Channel Islands of Jersey and Guernsey (not on our map), which in turn prevented Allied naval operations in the waters west of Cotentin in support of the air-borne troops that were landed near the west coast of the peninsula. It is an important fact that, except in the area east of the Orne estuary, air-borne troops were, with all their lavish equipment, never able to hold out unless they succeeded in joining hands with formations landed from the sea.

FIRST BATTLE CENTERS

The focal points during the first few days of battle were (1) east and west of the Orne estuary and along the strip between the Orne and the Vire Rivers, i.e., the western part of the Calvados coast, where the British Second Army under General Dempsey established a number of beachheads; and (2) in the Vire estuary and north of Carentan, where the US First Army under General Bradley gained a foothold. At the end of the first week of battle, these two armies had, with the aid of an uninterrupted flow of reinforcements, succeeded in effecting a junction and in consolidating a bridgehead stretching in a semicircle within the northernmost of the red lines shown on our map. On the other hand, the Allies also had considerable failures: (1) British attacks against Le Havre and the coast south of that port as well as the capture of Caen had been frustrated, the troops to the east of the Orne finding themselves in a precarious position; (2) the Americans had failed to cut off the Cotentin Peninsula at its narrowest part, an object indicated by landings south of Lessay, nor had they managed either to capture or isolate Cherbourg. German fortified points were, moreover, continuing to operate from within the Allied bridgehead, a fact which also characterized the fighting of the ensuing weeks. The invaders, having the advantage of determining the time and place of attack, must make the best of the surprise element. Every minute counts in pushing ahead as fast as possible before the defenders can put their machinery into high gear and bring up reserves strong enough to oppose a concentrated attack. This is why the Germans manning the first line and in Cherbourg were fighting to the last in order to give their High Command enough time to move up and deploy for counteraction.

CHERBOURG

Not until the end of the second week did the Americans reach the west of the Cotentin Peninsula at Carteret and begin their northward push against the now isolated German forces in and around Cherbourg. Meanwhile, the British advanced toward St. Lô and Caumont, while bitter fighting raged in the Tilly sector. East of the Orne, the British remained hard-pressed, although they were now being reinforced from the air, the sea, and across the river. In this



The first six weeks of the Battle of Normandy

particular sector, the fighting took place in wooded terrain, both sides forming hedgehog positions and using infiltration tactics, making it impossible to ascertain a front line.

Although the British were active around Tilly during the third week, this period was marked by the battle for Cherbourg. Throwing large forces into the fray, General Bradley tried to overwhelm the defenders in the shortest possible time. As the speedy unloading of heavy war material along the beaches offered great difficulties, it seemed worth-while to the Allied command to risk sanguinary losses if Cherbourg could be captured with a minimum of destruction to the harbor facilities. Heavily outnumbered, the defenders had after heroic fighting to give way. At the end of that week, the northern part of the peninsula was in American hands, except for a number of fortified points within the immediate area of Cherbourg and for the northwesternmost corner of the peninsula, where German troops fought on to the last. The Germans had found time thoroughly to destroy the port. Two weeks after the occupation of Cherbourg, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that no Allied vessel had entered the port yet. Two minesweepers had worked their way to within 1½ miles of the docks, which was as far as any of them had been able to get. Thousands of mines completely blocked the access to the inner harbor. As long as these had not been cleared away, the Allies could not even get near the wrecks of ships and other obstacles which were still barring the way.

NAVAL SCREEN

During the ensuing three weeks, the Anglo-Americans attempted to expand their bridgehead toward the south. A frontal attack in the direction of Lessay did not get beyond La Haye-du-Puits where, after a fluctuating battle, the Germans halted the southward advance. Equally unsuccessful were attacks made from Carentan in a southwesterly direction toward Périers. The defenders did not withdraw toward the Lessay-Périers area until the sixth week, nor did the Americans reach St. Lô before July 18. In counterattacks, German tanks even penetrated beyond the Taute-Vire canal. The British, advancing toward Caen from the north and west, occupied that part of the town which is situated west of the Orne. Their thrust across the Odon River failed to reach the middle Orne.

The Allied Command has taken advantage of its tremendous naval superiority and

has used the firing power and mobility of its heavy warships to the utmost. Protected by an air force far superior in numbers, the Allied fleet showered the defense with a heavy barrage, except at those points where coastal guns of equal range and caliber could answer them, as, for example, off Cherbourg and Le Havre. A battleship of the *Nelson-Rodney* class with at least nine guns of the heaviest caliber can fire two salvos of 9 tons each every 90 seconds for several hours, or eighty salvos aggregating 720 tons per hour. One hour's bombardment by three battleships approximately equals the amount of explosives dropped by 1,000 bombers in a raid on Berlin. It is fairly safe to assume that the German High Command will not accept a decisive battle within the range of Allied naval guns; the Anglo-Americans, on the other hand, have as yet hardly ventured out of that range.

ALLIED NUMBERS . . .

It is remarkable that, contrary to expectations, the invasion operations have up to the time of writing been carried out only in Normandy and nowhere else. This and the fact that both armies in General Montgomery's army group have been swelled to a strength far exceeding that of regular armies may be due to the extreme difficulties experienced by the Allies in their landings, the Allies having underestimated the powerful German defense and their own casualty rate. In the sixth week of the invasion the British Second and US First Armies in Normandy were estimated to be about 40 divisions strong. In view of the fact that the invasion army stationed in the British Isles before June 6 was estimated by German military circles at 80 to 100 divisions, this would mean that about half of it has been sent across to Normandy. However, reinforcements may be coming directly from America: among prisoners recently taken in the St. Lô sector there were troops shipped from New York only a fortnight previously, with one day's stopover in England. In comparison to the tremendous size of the landed armies, the space at their disposal for deployment and an offensive into the heart of France is rather narrow, all the more so as the German defense line hemming it in includes swamps, rivers, flooded areas, and forests. Strong attacks for the purpose of widening the bridgehead into a large deployment area are therefore to be expected. There also remains the possibility of another landing, perhaps to be co-ordinated with actions from the Normandy bridgehead.

. . . AND ALLIED LOSSES

A factor which has affected Montgomery's plans is the new German weapon V-1, the "dynamite meteors." Apart from the destruction wrought almost without interruption since June 16 in London and southern England, where war industries, stocks of arms, and communications have been hit—entailing certain supply difficulties and imposing an additional strain upon railways through the evacuation of London and the mobilization of workmen in other counties—the Allies have been forced to employ a considerable percentage of their air force against the bases whence the V-1's are assumed to be fired and against the flying bombs themselves. The fact that owing to V-1 the invasion forces did not receive as much air support as had originally been provided for was admitted by the British Prime Minister in his speech of July 6. But what may be worse is that the V-1 is heralding a new kind of warfare the effects of which cannot be gauged as yet.

The Allied losses in men can only be guessed at. But considering the fact that most of the time they had to advance in frontal attacks against strong German fortifications and that several troop transports were sunk, losses are likely to exceed 200,000. Allied material lost during the first month of the invasion battle included, according to the German High Command communiqué of July 8, 1,655 planes and 1,059 tanks, not counting those lost at sea. 56 transports aggregating 348,600 tons were sunk and an additional 45 units with a tonnage of 269,000 tons damaged. 2 heavy cruisers, 4 light cruisers, 26 destroyers, one frigate, and 10 E-boats were sunk; while several battleships, 22 cruisers, 25 destroyers, 13 E-boats, and 28 special landing boats sustained heavy damages. Losses through mines are not included. Part of these German naval successes were achieved by another new weapon, the "One-Man Torpedoes."

The attitude of the French population has proved a disappointment to the Allies. Contrary to expectations, they found that the majority of the French people were indifferent or even hostile toward the invaders. This is not to be wondered at. After suffering for months from Allied bombing

attacks on their towns and villages, the French were placed in a new predicament by the invasion, and tens of thousands of French civilians have already lost their lives in the course of the battles.

An interesting factor is the cool reception accorded in Moscow to the news from the invasion front. The Soviets have been waiting so long for the invasion that they can no longer work up much enthusiasm over it.

THE WINTER WAR IN THE EAST

November 1, 1943, to April 15, 1944

In the December 1943 issue we gave an account of the summer campaign of 1943 carrying the story up to November 1. The following analysis is a very brief one, as the winter war was conducted along principles similar to those discussed in connection with the summer campaign.

THE PLANS

AFTER Stalingrad, the German High Command saw quite clearly that under the prevailing circumstances a further offensive into the depths of the USSR could not be expected to bring about decisive results. It decided to withdraw its armies far back toward the west, nearer to its bases and system of communications, and thus to economize in men and material in view of the expected demand for German troops in other parts of the Continent. This withdrawal, however, was to be carried out in constant combat with the Red armies, inflicting on them as large losses as possible. Moreover, it did not mean that the Germans have abandoned the idea of offensives, but merely that they are waiting for the opportune time and place for them. This is the strategy the German High Command had successfully employed during the summer campaign of 1943, and it planned to adhere to it in the course of the winter too.

The Soviet High Command, on the other hand, was in a different position. By exerting frontal pressure over a very extended front, from Velikiye Luki to the Sea of Azov, it had been able to gain much ground during the summer but had not succeeded in destroying German manpower to any noteworthy extent. Even according to their own figures, the Soviets had, in the period from July 5 to November 5, 1943, captured only an average of 790 men a day, of whom more than half were wounded. But now the winter, always the most favorable season for Russian armies, was approaching, and the Kremlin apparently laid its plan along a new line. This plan has been made evident by the course of events since November 3, and it consisted of this: while a certain amount of pressure all along the front was to prevent the Germans from denuding some parts of the front in favor of others, the real attack was to be made by the First Ukrainian Army under General Vatutin in the Kiev area. The overwhelmingly superior quantities of men and material assembled here were to push westward and then to wheel around toward the south in order to cut off and annihilate the German armies in the Dniepr bend.

In a way, the Soviets tried to repeat their Stalingrad maneuver. Again the Germans were standing in a triangle pointing eastward. In the winter of 1942/43 this triangle followed the bend of the Don and had its apex at Stalingrad. In the autumn of 1943 the triangle followed the banks of the Dniepr and had its point in the easternmost corner of this river's bend. In the case of Stalingrad the Russian success was brought about by the breakthrough at Bogutchar, whence the triangle was cut off at its narrow base, and a subsidiary breakthrough at Serafimovich, halfway between Bogutchar and Stalingrad. (See our article "The Winter War," May 1943.) The plans in the autumn of 1943 called for similar breakthroughs in the left flank of the southern German armies, preceded by a push toward the west with the purpose of enlarging the area and number of troops to be cut off.

SOVIET OPERATIONS

On November 3 the Red offensive in the Kiev area began. It made rapid headway in the direction of Jitomir, which was evacuated by the Germans ten days later. But while the Soviets were celebrating a great victory and the collapse of the German front, they were hit by Field Marshal Manstein in the left flank of their wedge